

Extraordinary tale of loss - and survival

By: SHAWN R. DAIGLE, Special to Weekend in The New Britain Herald, The Middletown Press, The Bristol Press 09/25/2008



NEWINGTON - Nearly two years after a tragic plane accident, which took the life of her older sister Donna and left her other sister Linda scarred for life, Judy Mandel entered the world as the embodiment of her family's hope for the future. That realization began for Mandel, two years before her birth, on Jan. 22, 1952, in Elizabeth, N.J.

Mandel's family at the time lived on the second floor of a three-story brick apartment building, right above a candy store.

The morning of the crash was just like any other. Her 7-year-old sister Donna left for school like she did most mornings. Mandel's father - who owned his own jewelry store one mile away from their apartment - left for work unaware of what was soon to befall his family.

The crash itself occurred a little after 3 in the afternoon. American Airlines Flight 6780 was approaching Newark Airport - just three miles away from their home.

Running a little late after stops in Rochester and Syracuse, N.Y., the plane had veered off course. Visibility was poor and the snow that was falling had turned to an icy rain.

The two-engine Convair, carrying 20 passengers and crew - for reasons still unknown, Mandel says - descended from the sky, skimmed a nearby girl's high school, struck the three-story brick apartment building Mandel's family was living in and spun into a two-family house, where it came to rest, according to press reports at the time.

"[The plane] sheared off the top of the apartment building and fuel

from it set the apartment on fire," explained Mandel. "My sister who was killed wasn't supposed to be home, she was supposed to be at school working on a project." Because the weather was so poor, her sister Donna and a friend decided to head home before it became dark outside.

While Donna's friend was hurt, she wasn't killed. Donna would eventually die from her injuries. Mandel's mother, grandmother and sister Linda - all in the apartment - survived the crash as well. Her father hadn't come home yet. Everyone on the third floor of the apartment was killed.

In all, 27 people lost their life that cold January afternoon, including all crew and occupants of the plane, as well as seven residents of Elizabeth on the ground. Former Secretary of War Robert Patterson was among the passengers killed.

One victim of the accident, however, wasn't counted, according to Mandel. The pilot of the doomed plane was actually from the neighborhood. "The wife was looking out the window and saw the plane crash," said Mandel. "She was pregnant and had a miscarriage."

If not for an alert stranger, who prevented her mother from re-entering the burning apartment building after the crash, Mandel's mother could also have been among the list of dead that day.

After the accident, it was up to those left behind to begin to pick up the shattered pieces of their lives, something Elizabeth residents had become accustomed to over the last several weeks. The crash of Flight 6780 was the second in a series of three crashes in Elizabeth from 1951 to 1952. Only three-quarters of a mile from where the plane had crashed, the previous month a C-46 had dove into Elizabeth, killing 56 passengers.

With the second accident in less than two months, Newark Airport was shut down for a time, only to reopen later. No cause for the accident was ever discovered, though it was believed the poor weather may have played a role in the crash.

For Mandel's sister Linda, the accident's aftermath became a series of hospital visits and surgeries. Burned over 80 percent of her body and requiring skin grafts, Linda was in the hospital for nearly a year after the crash and until the age of 20 made trips to the hospital at least twice a year to undergo reconstructive surgery.

Mandel's mother, traumatized by the event, began to suffer from depression. It was suggested to her that perhaps a new child might turn around her feeling of melancholy which had begun to grip her life. As a result of such advice, Mandel's mother and father made a conscious decision to have another child. Mandel was born in May of 1954.

It is not uncommon for parents of a deceased child - like Mandel's - to decide afterward to have another. According to the "Encyclopedia of Death and Dying," in 1964, Albert and Barbara Cain coined the term, "replacement children," to describe such children who oftentimes later in life suffer from psychological problems, including an inability to define their own identity apart from their deceased sibling.

Some parents try to force their new child to exhibit the same characteristics as that of their deceased son or daughter. Such parents can become too restrictive or overprotective, while the new child in their own right can become overly fearful, anxious and preoccupied with death.

While Mandel says her parents did not force her to become the embodiment of her deceased sister Donna, her childhood wasn't easy. "You grow up feeling the world is a random place. That anything can happen," she explained.

Mandel felt like an outsider in her own family. She couldn't understand why her parents lavished so much attention on her older sister Linda and she struggled to form her own identity apart from that of Donna.

Only years later with the birth of a son - now 20 - and after culling through reams of notes scribbled on yellow-lined paper by her parents, hopeful that one day she would tell their story - did Mandel come to finally realize why her parents acted the way they had and come to grips with the fears that had dogged her young life.

Writing her memoir became a cathartic experience for Mandel, one she believes she couldn't have undertaken if her parents had still been alive when she wrote her memoir.

"I think I needed the distance. I am not sure I could have written it while they were still here. I wish I could have," she said. "I started this book when both my parents passed away. I decided this was a story I needed to tell."

Mandel started writing her memoir in late 2004. It is the first book she has ever written. A former reporter for The Hartford Courant, Mandel moved to Connecticut in 1972 to attend the University of Hartford and has lived in state ever since.

With her memoir already written, Mandel has been visiting New York and meeting with different agents and hopes to soon find one interested in her story. Then it will become an issue of finding a publisher.

"[My memoir] was really the hardest work I've ever done from a technical and emotional standpoint," she said. While challenging, it was also the vehicle to discoveries about herself, her past and her strength and she hopes it will become a guidepost to others facing their own tragedies in life.

"[The memoir] is a hopeful story of recovery," she emphasized. "I am hoping people who have had tragedy in their lives can see that there is hope and normalcy can be recovered."

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